

TFT History

Background to TFT

TFT (The Fantasy Trip) was a fantasy role playing game that was published from 1977 till 1982 or 1983. It was popular in the United States and elsewhere during the early to mid 1980s.

As a fantasy role playing game, players created characters and pretended to have adventures in a fantasy world of medieval combat and magic. It was like playing Lord of the Rings or Conan the Barbarian. Because this before computer games and the internet, players used paper , pencil, dice rolls and lots of imagination.

Beginnings of TFT

TFT was published by Metagaming. Metagaming was a company founded by Mr. Howard Thompson in Austin, Texas, in or about 1975. Metagaming mostly published science fiction games and tactical war games. This was during a time before computer games had been invented. War games (tactical and strategic) were popular, but they were somewhat expensive and their rules were cumbersome.

Mr. Thompson's innovation was the "microgame." These were games that were inexpensive enough for most people (especially most kids) to afford. Microgames consisted of a small booklet of rules, a sheet of small cardboard game pieces ("counters"), a small fold-up map on heavy paper (which served as the game board), and a small six-sided die. All of this fit into a clear plastic baggy (like a sandwich baggy). They were inexpensive (about \$3 each), and they were small and flexible enough to fit into a kid's back-pocket. The concept was a success.

By 1977, one of Metagaming's young designers, Mr. Steve Jackson, had written two successful "microgames" about tank battles, Ogre and GEV. He then decided to turn his hand to writing a "microgame" for medieval combat. At that time, a new kind of game was becoming popular: the fantasy role playing game (frpg). The most popular of these was Dungeons and Dragons. However, the rules for combat for frpg's were poorly designed at the time. (Again, this was before computer games had been invented.) So, Mr. Jackson decided to correct that problem. He wrote a set of rules to represent medieval combat that could be used by any frpg. The result was an elegantly simple game that balanced playability and realism. It was called Melee. Metagaming published it as a "microgame" in mid-1977, and it was successful. By the end of 1977, Mr. Jackson wrote a similar set of rules for magical combat, called Wizard; and it sold well too.

The Creation of TFT

It quickly became clear to the people at Metagaming that Melee and Wizard could also

be the basis for a new fantasy role playing game. This became TFT.

Originally, Steve Jackson designed TFT to be published as a single boxed game. It would have been a single volume of rules, an adventure scenario, color maps, dice, and plenty of playing pieces. It would have cost about \$20.

However, Howard Thompson (the owner of Metagaming) decided this would be too expensive for the market. Instead, he decided to publish TFT in the form of three booklets of rules (which cost about \$5 each), and he published the adventure supplement as a separate booklet (for about \$3). It was hoped that the game would be more affordable and more flexible in this way. In reality, a player still needed all three booklets of rules to play TFT. Nevertheless, it was cheaper and somewhat more flexible. The rules cost a total of \$15; that was cheaper than \$20 for a boxed game. The adventure scenario was available for \$3 as an option.

The TFT rules booklets and the adventure scenario were published in March of 1980. The three rules booklets were Advanced Melee (a set of advanced combat rules), Advanced Wizard (a set of advanced magical rules), and In the Labyrinth (rules for creating characters and running an adventure in a fantasy game setting). The adventure scenario was Tollenkar's Lair (a classic example of an adventure where characters explore and conquer an underground complex).

Altogether, TFT was successful. At one point TFT was second only to Dungeons and Dragons as the most popular fantasy role playing game. Although the game was not perfect (most notably, in its lack of an index), TFT was nevertheless very well respected for its simplicity and its excellent balance of realism and playability.

TFT "Microquests"

Metagaming soon published several "microquests" for TFT.

The "microquests" were the application to TFT of Howard Thompson's "microgame" concept: small, inexpensive games that anyone could afford. Like the "microgames", the microquests consisted of a small booklet plus a small six-sided die and a cardboard sheet of counters (as game pieces), all tucked inside a clear plastic sandwich baggy or a small cardboard box. They cost about \$3 each.

Each microquest was a short adventure that was played according to the TFT rules. The rules booklets consisted of numbered paragraphs of instructions to achieve some goal or solve some mystery, while overcoming foes, traps and obstacles. In short, they were short stories in which people could play characters and combat according to the TFT rules. They could be played by a small group of gamers. They could also be played solo (because the numbered paragraphs were arranged randomly). They were very popular. In effect, they were the predecessors for many of today's computer games.

There were several series of microquests.

The Thorsz

Three microquests had the same setting: Death Test, Death Test 2, and Orb Quest. In this series, a mercenary captain (Dhallak m'Thorsz Carn) was hiring new mercenary recruits. To join his company, potential recruits had to pass a lethal set of tests of combat skills and martial honor. The first two games represented those tests; the third game represented the group's first assignment in the Thorsz' service. All three of these games were well-designed examples of an adventure set in a dungeon or castle and consisting of overcoming foes and traps.

Treasure Hunts

Two other microquests shared a different setting. Treasure of the Silver Dragon and Treasure of the Unicorn Gold were outdoors adventures. Instead of going through dungeons or castles, characters journeyed on an overland quest to find a rumored treasure: first of a silver dragon and then of a golden unicorn. During the adventures, characters had to overcome hostile imperial troops, wandering brigands, wild animals and various other creatures. The treasure, when it was found, was both money and wisdom.

These games are unique because they were also promotional efforts by Metagaming. Each fictional treasure hunt was tied to a genuine one. For each game, Metagaming actually buried treasure and hid the instructions to find the treasure in clues that were scattered throughout the game. The buried treasure for the first game was a silver statue of a dragon; the buried treasure for the second game was a golden statue of a unicorn. If a person found the treasure, he or she would also receive a \$10,000 (US) check from Metagaming. Hence, people were encouraged to buy the games in order to learn the clues to find the buried treasure and claim the \$10,000 prize.

The treasure to the first game, Treasure of the Silver Dragon, was quickly discovered just six weeks after the game's release.

The treasure to the second game, Unicorn Gold, was never officially found. Metagaming went out of business soon after Unicorn Gold was published. The buried treasure was probably discovered and removed years ago. Still, the mystery of its location endures. Two people independently worked out the same solution to this mystery.

Unfortunately, Treasure of the Silver Dragon and Treasure of the Unicorn Gold are now mostly remembered as clever marketing efforts. However, they were also good adventures with a genuinely thoughtful perspective.

Three Different Adventures

Three other microquests were independent of each other.

Grail Quest was an adventure set in the days of King Arthur. Characters were Knights of the Round Table who had to go on an overland adventure in search of the Holy Grail. During the course of the adventure, the true meaning of the grail (selfless service for the good of others) is discovered along with the cup itself. Grail Quest was perhaps the best designed of all the microquests.

Security Station was set in a combination of high technology and medieval fantasy. Characters came from communities which were at a medieval level of development and which were suffering from a shortage of metals. The characters were from one of these villages, searching for metals to bring home to their people. After entering a cave, however, they found themselves transported to an underground complex that turned out to be a fall-out shelter in a post-nuclear war era. Once there, the characters had to battle foes and obstacles in order to find metal and return home.

Master of the Amulets consisted of a character being teleported to an isolated and magical valley. In order to escape and return home, the character had to overcome foes and collect several magical amulets.

Other Scenarios

There were two other adventure scenarios for TFT. However, they were not published by Metagaming. They were The Warrior Lords of Darok and The Forest Lords of Dihad. Instead of "microquests," these were full-sized booklets which described an entire country in which adventures could take place. Some were impressed with the level of detail in these scenarios. Others felt that they were not in the same spirit as the original TFT games.

Moreover, Metagaming attempted to broaden the development of TFT to include tactical rules for small armies through a game called The Lords of Underearth.

Further developments were intended for TFT both as a role playing game and as a tactical game. However, Metagaming went out of business in either 1982 or 1983.

Endings

By May of 1980, Steve Jackson (the designer of TFT) and Howard Thompson (the publisher of TFT, through Metagaming) had agreed to part company. Mr. Jackson went on to found his own successful games company, Steve Jackson Games. He has published many other games since then, including one called GURPS, which is regarded by many to be a kind of second generation of TFT. It is much more detailed and realistic than TFT, but some would say it is less easy to play than TFT.

Metagaming continued to publish TFT till 1982 or 1983, when Metagaming went out of business. Howard Thompson was the owner of Metagaming and, presumably, of the

copyrights to TFT. However, Mr. Thompson left the gaming industry after Metagaming closed; and he has not been heard from since then. TFT has never been republished since Metagaming went out of business, and no one has enforced the copyrights to TFT since then either. Indeed, the current ownership of those copyrights has become a matter of speculation.

Epilogue

But, TFT remains. It is considered to be a classic among game designers and aficionados of fantasy role playing games because of TFT's elegant simplicity and its balance of realism and fun. TFT also has the warm regard of former players who enjoyed the game in their youth. Many of them have children of their own, and some of them are teaching their kids to play TFT. Hence, maybe a new generation will discover TFT as a springboard for enjoyment, friendship and the imagination.

Epilogue, Part II

There are several fan based revised versions of TFT on the net, as of 2006. There are new solos for TFT being developed and released, along with a work-alike ruleset called Legends of the Ancient World.